CLAIMS:

1. A method of vending thermal seats comprising the steps of:

providing a plurality of thermal seats, each seat having an RFID tag associated therewith;

heating one of the seats for a customer;

storing customer-specific information in the RFID tag of the seat;

providing a check-out station for return of the seat after the customer's use thereof, the station including a seat-receiving housing and an RFID tag reader operable to obtain information from the RFID tag when the customer deposits the seat in the housing and, in response to the obtainment of information, generating a receipt for the customer confirming return of the seat.

2. The method as set forth in claim 1, wherein each of the seats includes:

an induction-heatable body including-

a plurality of discrete induction-heatable elements each including graphite material, and

heat retentive synthetic resin material located adjacent the elements and operable to serve as a heat sink upon magnetic induction heating of the elements, the elements characterized by the property of substantially simultaneous heating thereof by an externally applied magnetic field; and

a cover surrounding the body and including a cushioning component over the body and presenting a seating surface.

3. The method as set forth in claim 1, further including the step of reading information from the RFID tag of the seat to obtain information to be used when heating the seat.

4. The method as set forth in claim 1, wherein the heating step is performed with a magnetic induction heater.

5. The method as set forth in claim 1, further including the step of providing a self-serve warming station for use by the customer in reheating the seat after the seat has been vended.

6. A heating/vending system for heating, vending, and collecting thermal seats, the system comprising:

a plurality of magnetic induction-heatable thermal seats;

a charging/vending station for heating and vending the thermal seats; and

a check-out station for collecting the thermal seats after they have been used by consumers.

7. The system as set forth in claim 6, each of the thermal seats including:

an induction-heatable body including-

a plurality of discrete induction-heatable elements each including graphite material, and

heat retentive synthetic resin material located adjacent the elements and operable to serve as a heat sink upon magnetic induction heating of the elements, the elements characterized by the property of substantially simultaneous heating thereof by an externally applied magnetic field; and

a cover surrounding the body and including a cushioning component over the body and presenting a seating surface.

8. The system as set forth in claim 7, each of the thermal seats further including an RFID tag operable to store information thereon.

9. The system as set forth in claim 8, the charging/vending station including-

a plurality of magnetic induction cooktops for heating the thermal seats,

an RFID reader for reading information from the RFID tags of the thermal seats, and

a credit card reader in communication with the RFID readers for delivering customer information to the RFID readers to be written to the RFID tags.

10. The system as set forth in claim 8, the check-out station including-

a substantially enclosed housing having at least one chute formed therein for receiving thermal seats returned by consumers,

an RFID reader positioned in the vicinity of the chute to read the RFID tags of the returned thermal seats,

a control unit for obtaining information from the RFID reader, and

a receipt printer coupled with the control unit for printing receipts when the thermal seats are returned.

11. The system as set forth in claim 6, further including a self-serve warming station including a plurality of magnetic induction cooktops for use by consumers to reheat thermal seats after the seats have been vended.

12. A method of vending thermal seats comprising the steps of:

placing a thermal seat having an RFID tag associated therewith on a magnetic induction heater;

reading the RFID tag with an RFID tag reader associated with the heater;

heating the seat based at least partially upon information read from the RFID tag;

writing customer information onto the RFID tag with the RFID tag reader; and

removing the thermal seat from the magnetic induction heater and giving it to a consumer.

13. The method as set forth in claim 12, wherein each of the seats includes:

an induction-heatable body including-

a plurality of discrete induction-heatable elements each including graphite material, and

heat retentive synthetic resin material located adjacent the elements and operable to serve as a heat sink upon magnetic induction heating of the elements, the elements characterized by the property of substantially simultaneous heating thereof by an externally applied magnetic field; and

a cover surrounding the body and including a cushioning component over the body and presenting a seating surface.

14. The method as set forth in claim 12, further including the step of reading information from the RFID tag of the seat to obtain information to be used when heating the seat.

15. The method as set forth in claim 12, wherein the heating step is performed with a magnetic induction heater.

16. The method as set forth in claim 12, further including the step of providing a self-serve warming station for use by the customer in reheating the seat after the seat has been vended.

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17. A method of vending thermal seats, the method comprising the steps of:

providing a plurality of thermal seats, each seat having an RFID tag associated therewith, and each seat including -

an induction-heatable body including a plurality of discrete induction-heatable elements and a heat retentive material located adjacent the elements and operable to serve as a heat sink upon induction heating of the elements by an externally applied magnetic field, and

a cover surrounding the body and including a cushioning component over the body and presenting a seating surface;

heating one of the thermal seats for a customer;

storing customer-specific information in the RFID tag of the thermal seat; and

dispensing the thermal seat to the customer.

18. A method of vending thermal seats, the method comprising the steps of:

providing a plurality of thermal seats, each seat having an RFID tag associated therewith, and each seat including -

an induction-heatable body including a plurality of discrete induction-heatable elements and a heat retentive material located adjacent the elements and operable to serve as a heat sink upon induction heating of the elements by an externally applied magnetic field, and

a cover surrounding the body and including a cushioning component over the body and presenting a seating surface;

heating one of the thermal seats for a customer;

storing customer-specific information in the RFID tag of the thermal seat;

dispensing the thermal seat to the customer; and

providing a check-out station for return of the thermal seat after the customer's use thereof, the check-out station including a seat-receiving housing and an RFID tag reader operable to obtain information from the RFID tag when the customer deposits the thermal seat in the seat-receiving housing and, in response to the obtainment of information, generating a receipt for the customer confirming return of the thermal seat.

19. A system for heating, vending, and collecting thermal seats, the system comprising:

a plurality of magnetic induction-heatable thermal seats, each of the thermal seats including -

an induction-heatable body including a plurality of discrete induction-heatable elements and a heat retentive material located adjacent the elements and operable to serve as a heat sink upon induction heating of the elements by an externally applied magnetic field, and

a cover surrounding the body and including a cushioning component over the body and presenting a seating surface;

a dispensing station for heating and dispensing the thermal seats; and

a self-service heating station adapted to allow for reheating the vended thermal seats as desired.

20. A method of vending thermal seats, the method comprising the steps of:

placing a thermal seat having an RFID tag associated therewith on a magnetic induction heater, wherein each of the seats includes -

an induction-heatable body including a plurality of discrete induction-heatable elements and a heat retentive material located adjacent the elements and operable to serve as a heat sink upon induction heating of the elements by an externally applied magnetic field, and

a cover surrounding the body and including a cushioning component over the body and presenting a seating surface;

reading the RFID tag with an RFID tag reader associated with the magnetic induction heater;

heating the thermal seat based at least partially upon information read from the RFID tag;

writing customer-specific information onto the RFID tag with the RFID tag reader; and

dispensing the heated thermal seat to a customer.